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FM AMEMBASSY CONAKRY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0801
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L CONAKRY 000282

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/07/17

TAGS: PGOV PINR GV

SUBJECT: GUINEA'S NEW PRIME MINISTER PUSHING THE LIMITS OF CHANGE

REF: Conakry 277

Classified by Ambassador Jackson McDonald. Reasons 1.4 (b)and(d).

¶1. (C) On March 6, newly appointed Prime Minister Lansana Kouyate met with the Ambassador to request PL-480 rice on a priority basis to help meet Guinea's post-strike food needs (septel).

¶2. (C) The Ambassador took advantage of this one-on-one meeting to ascertain where Kouyate stands on forming a new government. He asked Kouyate how he planned to reconcile the people's demand for real change with the establishment's desire to maintain power and privilege.

¶3. (C) Without hesitation, Prime Minister Kouyate replied, "I'm siding with the people; I'm for change." He said that he did not want the re-appointment of a single minister from the old government.

¶4. (C) Kouyate commented that President Lansana Conte had told him that he wanted to remain Minister of Defense, that he wanted Jean-Paul Sarr to stay as Minister of Agriculture, but that Kouyate was free to select the other ministers. Kouyate said that he had told President Conte that he was no longer up to the Minister of Defense job. Conte is now considering three candidates -- all senior military officers -- for the post. Kouyate said that he also wanted a new Minister of Agriculture. (Note: Jean-Paul Sarr, one of President Conte's pals, is involved in running Conte's large rice farms, but he is a notoriously incompetent minister.)

¶5. (C) Kouyate stated that he had submitted two draft decrees to President Conte, one to dismiss the current government, the other to establish the new government's structure. Kouyate wants no more than 18 or 19 ministers, as opposed to almost 30 now.

¶6. (C) Kouyate said that he was continuing his consultations with the labor unions, civil society, the National Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, the political parties, etc., to build their support for his new government and to obtain their input on ministerial candidates. Kouyate noted that he had requested Ousmane Dore to return to Guinea from the IMF and had convinced a certain Camara to return from Mexico, where he has been extremely successful in the agricultural sector.

¶7. (C) The Ambassador asked how Kouyate will deal with the old guard, the members of which will undercut him, if necessary, to preserve their power. Kouyate said the old guard has been resisting change for almost 50 years and that their resistance to change has resulted in Guinea's failed development. Kouyate remarked that it would be impossible to convince the old guard to change their ways

by words, but it might be possible to gain their support over time by demonstrating that change is good for Guinea.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Prime Minister Kouyate is consulting broadly within Guinea and reaching out to the Guinean diaspora. He clearly wants to bring Guinea into the modern world. He is trying to ride the wave of popular support for change. He is betting that he can manage the old guard, including President Conte.

¶9. (C) Many observers are predicting, however, that sooner or later this new Prime Minister will hit the same brick wall as his predecessors when Conte re-exerts his presidential prerogatives. Indeed, it remains uncertain for how long and to what extent President Conte will permit Prime Minister Kouyate to use his (delegated) powers as head of government. The difference now, however, is that the people have taken to the streets for the first time in Guinea's history to demand change, and they are willing to mobilize again, if necessary, to achieve it.

MCDONALD